

WEST OXFORDSHIRE FIELD CLUB



www.thefieldclub.org.uk

Newsletter No. 118 Spring 2024

EDITORIAL

This season is a time of firsts – the first snowdrop, the first primrose, the first bluebell, first swallow, first cuckoo ... We are so keen for the green world to return that we become sensitised to the smallest sign. In the dim, distant past when I was at school, there was a glass of wildflowers in the biology lab – we were encouraged to bring in a specimen of the first of each species we discovered, a way to bring the emerging spring into the classroom.

The regular progression of spring noted in country sayings – February fill-dyke, March coming in like a lion and leaving like a lamb, and April, when “(if) Oak (flowers) before Ash, be prepared for a splash, Ash before Oak, be prepared for a soak (that came true this year)” is changing. Even in April, February’s dykes continued to fill and overflow, while the May flowers arrived without waiting for the April showers.

February’s sombre mood of grey days, mist and shadows can still entice the

photographer out, the landscape enhanced by black-and-white photography just as a performance of Macbeth I once saw at Stratford was made more atmospheric by the set and costumes being confined to black, white and shades of grey.

Stormy March and April are marked by drifts of foraging tits and finches, the



Fritillary, Ducklington

twisting tails of red kites as they ride the storms, and ragged wind-blown rooks, pale-faced, dishevelled and unsteady on their crooked legs as if reeling from a heavy night out. It is also a time to watch the racing clouds, imagining fantastic beasts, grotesque witches or comic faces in their everchanging forms, or peaks of whipped ice cream that change to candyfloss as the sun sets. Now that May is upon us the pace of change is accelerating, so do take advantage of WOFC walks and get out and enjoy it all

before the first flush of early summer fades. I wish you all a happy spring and summer.

Jill Bailey

YOUR NEWSLETTER

Many thanks to the people who wrote these reports. Big thanks, too, to our walks leaders and to the committee members who organised the programme. It's great to see more different people sending in reports. The full versions and species lists, if available, are on the website, thefieldclub.org.uk. There you will also find a blog of members' activities. Send these contributions to blog@thefieldclub.org.uk.

REPORTS

Sydllings Copse visit, 24 August 2023

This is one of my favourite nature reserves, close to Oxford city. I was already worried that the flowers would be over so late in the season, but when I learned on a recce a week before the visit that the roving sheep were going to be released to 'mow the grass', I really felt like cancelling the trip. However, with both Julia's and Maggie's optimism and the reassurance from the BBOWT warden that the sheep didn't like the sharp taste of herbs, we went ahead.



Sheep at Sydllings Copse

It was one of those beautiful, warm August days and eight of us gathered. Our Stone Age ancestors were using Sydllings Copse as a hunting ground – spearheads, used to hunt deer and wild boar, have been discovered there. A BBOWT volunteer also found bone evidence of wolves and grizzly bears. Sydllings Copse is described as being one of the most biodiverse habitats in middle England. The reserve supports over 400 plant species and ranges from broadleaf woodland, limestone grasslands, reedbed, fen and a stream to perhaps the most special – rare Oxfordshire heathland. There is also a rich variety of birds and insect life, with

butterflies including the Purple Hairstreak, Brown Hairstreak, Common Blue and Marbled White. Angela, a friend of our cameraman, Pete, was the recorder, with Maggie's two grandsons, Rowan and Fletcher, as lively observers.

We started recording on the limestone, and soon, with the sight of the pink Centaury, Wild Basil, Wild Liquorice, with its big seedheads, Marjoram and Yellow Rockrose, we could have been on a Cotswold hillside, instead of just over a mile from the edge of Oxford city. The butterflies were out, including Holly Blues, Brown Argus, Small Tortoiseshell, Gatekeepers, as well as dragonflies and grasshoppers, which we didn't identify.

A sheepish flock of sheep paused in their 'mowing', but I forgave them as they'd only trampled a bit of the grass and flowers! A Jay and Wren were calling in the wood.



Wild Liquorice

Further along the nature trail, we entered the wood and were delighted to see a Clustered Bellflower and Enchanters Nightshade. We descended the steep slope to the stream and fen, where Maggie spotted Ragged Robin, Marsh Thistle, Purple Loosestrife and Bulrush.

Up we climbed on the other side of the steep valley, to arrive at the heathland – Honeysuckle, Bracken, Blackberries and, amazingly, Common Heather growing with Wood Sage, Foxglove and wild sorrel. We went off-piste across the Bracken-covered slope, where we watched an emerald-coloured dragonfly patrolling to and fro, with puffball fungi on the slope.

One of our two new members, Tim, who had travelled from Chipping Norton with Rosie, was delighted to set up the SEEK app, so immediately started identifying everything that we passed! We ended our walk passing the tall Scots Pine trees and under the Sweet Chestnut trees. Altogether, a very enjoyable, rich and varied walk, which I hope we can repeat next year.

Elaine Steane

Pictures by Pete Bennion

Bats by the River Windrush with Gavin Hageman, 22 September 2023



Fourteen of us, including Maggie's two enthusiastic and bubbly grandchildren, met at the Woodford Road car park in Witney at 19.15. I was pleasantly surprised that so many people had turned up, given that the weather had been so bad the previous days and it had turned colder. We were blessed with little or no wind or rain but unfortunately it was a rather cold – only 11°C, which is a little cold for the flying insects that the bats like to feed on.

I gave a short introduction to bats and bat-detecting and also played some bat call recordings from my phone as examples of what to listen for when using the bat detectors. The group were divided into

small groups of 2 or 3 and each group was issued with a bat detector that had kindly been lent to me by BBOWT.

At about 19.30 we arrived at the wooden bridge over the River Windrush and turned on our bat detectors. Conditions for flying insects were very poor as it was a bit too cold, and there were far fewer bats than I would have expected had it had been warmer. By about 20.15 everyone had detected at least one bat, so we called it a night. Three different species were detected – Common and Soprano Pipistrelles and Daubenton's bat.

Gavin Hageman

Harcourt Arboretum, 15 October 2023

Eight of us braved the traffic on the Oxford southern bypass (it gets worse) and met at the Arboretum on the morning of Sunday 15 October. It was a bright, dry but cool day and the overnight temperature had dipped below 0°C for the first time this autumn. Until then nighttime temperatures (at RAF Benson) had been over 10°C and, because leaf colour depends both on temperature and day length, it had been just too warm for the leaves to start changing. Although the leaves were predominantly green, some of the maples in the Acer Grove had started to change colour and would surely be spectacular by now.



Despite the disappointing leaf colours there were other things to see, especially fungi. Just after the Acer Grove we surrounded a chap photographing a rather fine immature Shaggy Parasol, *Macrolepiota rhacodes*; everyone took pictures on their mobiles! He didn't seem to mind the invasion and was happy to chat. The others moved on but I stayed and

we had (for me) a very informative conversation about macrophotography and the finer points of 'focus stacking' – the way to get very sharp macro images, if you have all the (rather expensive) kit.



Spindle toughshanks

There were quite a lot of Parasols, *Macrolepiota procera*, present, especially in the meadow area. The woodchips used as a mulch at the bases of some of the trees were a rich habitat for fungi, particularly Redlead Roundhead, *Leratiomyces ceres*, and a coral fungus, possibly Upright Coral, *Ramaria stricta*. Some Spindle Toughshanks, *Collybia fusipes*, were growing at the base of a huge Oak. (Note: these IDs are tentative and should be confirmed by an expert!) There were probably other fungi to be found had we looked more closely.

So, although the leaves weren't performing, we did find some colours and species typical of autumn and it was a lovely sunny day for a change.

John Cobb

Fungus Foray, 5 November 2023

About 25 members met with Peter Creed for a fungus foray to look at mainly grassland fungi on Wallington Hill. A beautiful day, sunny and dry with a breeze, good conditions for seeing fungi.

Approaching the hill through woodland, we spotted Shaggy Parasols and Tawny Funnels making a promising start.

Emerging on to the hilltop, we were confronted with a magnificent view and a gathering of about 20 Red Kites wheeling over the slope. We soon spotted numerous Snowy Waxcaps, quickly followed by several more varieties of waxcaps, indicators of the unimproved grassland that makes this such a good site.



Golden Waxcap



Meadow Waxcap



Oily Waxcap

We then encountered the first of several rare species that Peter had hoped to show us, White Domecap (*Leucocybe connata*), a large, beige fungus growing in a long extended clump down the slope. This was followed by Big Blue Pinkgills (*Enteloma bloxamii*) – this one specific to the site as shown by its DNA, with a metallic dark grey cap. Several of the rarer fungi we saw are associated with the Common Rockrose, of which *Tricholoma sulphureum* var.

hemisulphureum (a rare variety of White Knight) is one, named for its distinct smell of gas. Also *Cortinarius ultrodistortus*, a small tawny fungus with orange gills. The last two of the fungi we had particularly come to see were Fruity Milkcap (*Lactarius evosmus*), slightly past its best but still beautiful with a bright orangey hue that almost glowed. And finally a single *Amanita simulans*, a rare member of the grisette group of Amanitas.



Big Blue Pinkgill



Tricholoma hemisulphureum var. *hemisulphureum*

There were still plenty of plants flowering on the hill; Wild Basil and Thyme, Harebells, Centaury, Yellow-wort and the all-important Common Rockrose.

It was a wonderful morning and we saw a wide range of different fungi – so many that we couldn't stop to identify them all before it was time to go home.

Jill Tigwell

WOFC Walk along the new Blenheim Community Path, 19 November 2023

While those who came along to the Fungus Foray enjoyed blue skies and sunshine, we who gathered for the Blenheim Community Path weren't so fortunate. Grey sky, drizzle and a chilly wind greeted us but, undaunted, seven doughty Field

Club members set off for what turned out to be quite a fruitful venture. Walking was easy, along a gravel path, and a pleasant change from boggy conditions everywhere else. The rain has brought interest, however, encouraging the last

remaining seeds in teasels to germinate *in situ* to form tiny vivid green leaflets.



The initial part of the path is lined with evergreens – Yew, Box and Laurel – and runs between the river and a stream before opening up to cross the bridge over the River Glyme. The water is currently very high after the rain, tumbling with considerable turbulence over a weir and joining the River Evenlode.

Further on the path is surrounded by deciduous woodland of Beech, Lime, Sycamore, Maple and Sweet Chestnut. There appear to be several species of Lime, some with the ‘skirt’ of twiggy growth around the base of the trunk, known as ‘epicormic’, while others had none. To either side of the path are tree trunks piled high, presumably felled when constructing the path. These make a



Trooping Funnels

perfect habitat for a wide variety of fungi, still in good condition despite all the rain. A few sleepy Two-spotted Ladybirds were noted, hiding under thistle heads to keep dry.

Lingering brings chill, so a hasty return to warm up was necessary. We were halted by an unusual bell-like call which led us to three Little Grebes

(Dabchicks) ducking and diving beside the rushes. Approaching the lake there was a good view of a Great White Egret posing elegantly and right next to it a Grey Heron. Mixed flocks of Mallard and Tufted Ducks were also noted. Few other birds were observed,

although a Siskin was heard in the woodland.

There were still wildflowers in bloom, including Water Figwort, Verbascum, Ragwort, Lesser Burdock and Spear Thistle.

Despite the weather, the walk was enjoyable and one that will certainly bring interest during all seasons. We managed to identify a few of the fungi we saw using Identify: Lumpy Bracket Fungus, Burgundydrop Bonnet or Bleeding Fairy Helmet (*Mycena haematopus*), Trooping Funnel Mushroom, Turkeytail and possibly Magpie Inkcap.

Julia Reid



Germinating Teasels

Bury Down Walk on Sunday 10 December 2023

The forecast for our walk on the Ridgeway predicted heavy rain and wind between 10.30 and 13.00, the exact times for our planned ramble. It was spot on. However,

six noble (or possibly foolish) souls, donned waterproofs, determined to defy the weather and complete the circuit.

Did we see any birds? Well, not many, and those we did spot were blown at such speed across us that it was hard to get a handle on them. We did, however find a few birds sheltering and feeding on the berries in scrubby Hawthorn bushes, but they were hard to see through the driving rain. A few Corn Buntings were noted, a male Yellowhammer, a Goldfinch, Linnets, Skylarks, a scattering of Fieldfares, and even a lone Blackbird. Red Kites were about too and apparently not so



bothered by the deluge. Similarly, gulls and corvids.

So not much to report, sadly, and photography was impossible in those conditions. However, we all gained a huge sense of achievement and appreciation of centrally heated homes!

Perhaps we'll have another attempt when the forecast is better.

Corn Bunting by John Cobb

Julia Reid

Whelford Pools, 10 February 2024

What a surprise! We arrived at Whelford Pools, near Lechlade, in pleasant sunshine. We almost felt that spring was in the air... and we weren't the only ones.



View from Whelford pools hide

We headed first to the hide, overlooking an old gravel pit, now home to a good assortment of waterfowl. A very smart male Goosander on the far side of the lake appeared to be trailing something behind him, but this turned out to be a female in a

courtship posture, swimming almost flat to the surface of the water right behind the male. It took a while, but he eventually took the hint! Other ducks seen on the first

lake included Pintail, Wigeon, Gadwall, Goldeneye and Common and Red-crested Pochard.

Our route took us through extensive areas of tree planting associated with a posh lakeside development, and we were very pleased to see a flock of Siskins feeding on cones at the top of some

alders. The final part of our route took us down a track adjoining open arable fields, where we spotted Linnets and Skylark, as well as three Hares.

Many thanks to our sharp-eyed leader, Andrew Mann, for identifying such an impressive list of birds.

Sue Morton

Visit to Wildlife Photographer of the Year Exhibition, Nature in Art, 15 Feb 2024

Only five Field Club members came along to the exhibition, which was a little disappointing. Those who did come along were able to enjoy some really exceptional photography.

The exhibition comprises shortlisted entries to the Competition, also exhibited in the Natural History Museum in London. Nearly fifty thousand entries had to be judged in advance of the Competition and then divided into several categories. Each category included five or six examples of work, including the winner as well as highly commended examples. Categories included 'Plants and Fungi' with incredible

examples of microscopic photography, 'Under Water' showed examples of the winning Horseshoe Crab in a portfolio of several images. Perhaps the category which had most impact was 'Photojournalism', some examples of which really pulled a punch in terms of the cruelty and destruction of wildlife round the globe. There are examples of all the winning photographs online, on the Natural History website.

Nature in Art houses a small permanent collection which some interesting paintings and sculptures of wildlife.

Sue Morton

Adelstrop walk, 17 March 2024

On Sunday, March 17, sixteen of us gathered at the Village Hall car park in Adelstrop for a walk to look for signs of spring. A wonderful spring day – long-awaited, blossom on the trees, blue sky, white clouds and a mild breeze.

We'd been warned about the mud and after a week of frequent rain spells we were all well shod for the conditions. Before we began Lindsay read us the well-known poem by Edward Thomas, written in 1914, about the occasion when his train had stopped there unexpectedly, and the one thing of note was that a Blackbird sang. For us, a pair of Kestrels flew over the car park.

We started off on the Macmillan Way, walking north through large grassy fields where ancient ridge and furrow patterns were clearly visible. Elaine gave us an interesting explanation of the reasons for their different shapes – all to do with

turning teams of oxen. There was standing water in most of the furrows, so some minor leaps were required.

Our destination was Chastleton House, reached after a particularly muddy uphill climb, but on reaching the top there was a

rewarding panorama of the surrounding countryside, and Skylarks were singing. Chastleton is built very much in the valley beyond, though its upper parts are just visible. Muddy tracks through an avenue of trees led to increasing glimpses of neat white lambs with their scruffily coated mothers. At the far end we joined a quiet road leading to the church, built in the 12th century,

where tea and luscious cakes were on sale. A few of the party lingered behind, examining log piles and muck heaps!

A pleasant time was spent in the churchyard resting our legs in the warm sunshine. The four storeys of Chastleton House, completed in 1612, could be



Cup fungus (*Peziza* sp)

studied at length from our perch on the dividing wall. Honeybees were busily buzzing in and out of a crack in the church wall.

Eventually we made our way up the hill to leave the NT grounds via more narrow muddy paths, sometimes in the woods



where Spurge Laurel was coming into flower, sometimes on open land, with the sun still high in the sky, until we arrived back at the Village Hall, some three hours from the start. A very pleasant and interesting walk.

Frosty Bonnet?

Frances Ashling

OBITUARY

Jean Kenworthy, d. 23 July 2023

A stalwart member of the Field Club almost from its inception, Jean came on almost all the holidays and many of the outings. A scientist by profession, she was on the Committee for almost four decades, kept the minutes and compiled the archives. Over the years, she had acquired an extensive knowledge of good places to walk, which was a help to less experienced programme compilers. Her forthright common sense was much appreciated on occasions when we found ourselves mired in indecision.

